

Herodotus and Ethiopia: a journey to the ends of the earth

Tim Rood

In the 520s B.C., the Persian king Cambyses dispatched a vast army to conquer Ethiopia. On the way he sent 50,000 men across the desert of Egypt to burn down a famous oracle at the Siwah oasis. Legend has it that somewhere in the middle of the great desert the army was hit by a sandstorm. There were no survivors. 'Two and a half thousand years later a mutilated corpse is washed up on the banks of the Nile at Luxor, an antiques dealer is savagely murdered in Cairo, and an eminent British archaeologist is found dead at the ancient necropolis of Saqqara. At first, the incidents appear unconnected . . .' – but it will of course turn out that they are not, as the heroes of Paul Sussman's novel *The Lost Army of Cambyses* beat a path to the barren heart of the western desert, and (to quote once more from the synopsis) 'the answer to one of the greatest mysteries of the ancient world'. (Don't worry, I won't give it away.)

The legend of the sandstorm that covered without trace an entire Persian army is known to us because it was told by the Greek historian Herodotus. Herodotus made the climax of his history Xerxes' invasion of Greece in 480–79 B.C., but he also looked back to earlier history to explain why Xerxes invaded. He told the story of the expansionist spirit in Persia that leads successive kings – Cambyses among them – to seek new conquests. But he also told the story of the limits imposed by nature on the Persians' desire for expansion. The sands of Egypt provide one such check.

For Herodotus the fate of the detachment that inspired Paul Sussman's historical novel-meets-thriller was less significant than the attempt to conquer Ethiopia. Cambyses had set off 'like a madman', 'without any orders for the provision of supplies, and without for a moment considering the fact that he was to take his men to the ends of the earth'. The army soon found itself reduced to extreme measures. The soldiers were forced to live first off pack animals, then off grass. Finally they resorted to cannibalism – and Cambyses called the whole thing off. The whole episode is an indictment of Cambyses' madness. But what Herodotus found most extraordinary about this expedition was not the soldiers' desperate expedients to ward off starvation, but the people Cambyses was attacking – the long-lived Ethiopians themselves.

The noble savage

Before launching his expedition Cambyses sent spies to find out about Ethiopia – and in particular whether the Table of the Sun existed. The legend of this mysterious table is at once revealed by Herodotus: among the Ethiopians there is said to be a meadow where fresh supplies of boiled meat appear each day – the gift of the earth, the locals claim. Was that story true? As readers we are led to share Cambyses' curiosity.

The spies Cambyses sent came from a tribe that knew the Ethiopian language – the Fish-Eaters. As a cover-up Cambyses gave them gifts for the Ethiopian king – a dyed cloak, some jewellery, a jar of myrrh, and some palm-wine. The Ethiopian king saw through the gifts – in more ways than one: he realized that the gifts were an excuse for spying, and he was also scornful of the gifts themselves. The dyed cloak he dismissed as fraudulent. When he saw the gold necklace and the bracelets, he

laughed and 'supposing them to be fetters, remarked that they had stronger ones in their own country'. As for the myrrh, he thought perfumes were as deceitful as dyed clothes.

The Ethiopian king emerges as a hard man to please. He plays the role of the noble savage critical of the hypocrisy of civilization. And he has a physique to match: the Ethiopians, Herodotus has explained, are 'said to be the tallest and best-looking people in the world'. It is as if the spies have stumbled across people living in a Golden Age.

Matrix of marvels

Herodotus reinforces this Golden Age image of the Ethiopians later in his work. In a fascinating excursus, he seeks to prove that 'the extremities of the inhabited world were allotted the finest features'. Ethiopia fits this pattern well: 'The furthest inhabited country towards the south-west is Ethiopia; here gold is found in great abundance, and huge elephants, and ebony, and all sorts of trees growing wild; the men, too, are the tallest in the world, the best-looking, and longest-lived.'

Herodotus seems to describe an unconnected series of marvels located at the extremities of the earth (India's massive gold-gathering ants, Arabia's fragrant spices). But Herodotus the detective manages to draw links between seemingly unconnected clues. His world is not a random space full of marvels. The fact that marvels are located at the margins is itself a pattern.

Nor is this the only pattern that Herodotus perceives in the cosmos. The margins have been allotted 'the finest features – just as Greece was allotted much the most finely mixed seasons'. There is a sort of cosmic balance, with Greece's finely mixed climate matching the extraordinary features at the world's edges. Paradoxically, by describing the extraordinary Herodotus conveys a sense of order. As in a good thriller, everything fits together. His world has a good plot.

Utopia?

But Herodotus' world may in fact be a bit messier than it seems. Take another look at the Ethiopian king's rejection of those gold necklaces and bracelets. The king thought they were fetters and remarked that they had stronger ones themselves. But why should he think that they were chains for locking up prisoners rather than chains for decoration? Herodotus conceals the problem by placing this response in between the king's dismissal of dyes and perfume as fraudulent. Perhaps Herodotus is setting a trap.

We learn the reason for the king's misunderstanding when he leads the Fish-Eaters on a tour of his country. They visit a spring with light, fragrant water, and then 'the king conducted them to a prison in which all the prisoners were bound with gold chains'. No surprise, then, that the Ethiopian king supposed that the Persians too used gold to punish prisoners, not to adorn aristocrats.

But there is a little twist in Herodotus' account. Herodotus proceeds to explain why the Ethiopians used gold: 'In Ethiopia the rarest and most precious metal is bronze.' Ethiopians value

bronze in the same way that Persians (and Greeks) value gold – and for the same reason. Cambyzes would have done better to load the Fish-Eaters with heaps of bronze to give away.

You are what you eat

Herodotus also shows an interest in explaining differences when he describes the Ethiopian king's response to the last of Cambyzes' gifts – the palm-wine. The king liked the wine. But when he asked what Persians ate and how long they lived, and then discovered how bread was made, he was 'not surprised that anyone who ate dung should die so soon, adding that Persians would doubtless die younger still, if they did not keep themselves going with that drink'. The Ethiopians by contrast lived mostly to be a hundred and twenty on a diet of boiled meat and milk. Herodotus seems to agree that longevity is related to diet – picking out the particular lightness of the Ethiopians' water as a reason for their long lives. Herodotus implies that the Persians and Greeks would be as long-lived as the Ethiopians if they lived in the same conditions.

But what then of the culinary marvel with which Herodotus aroused our curiosity at the outset – the Table of the Sun with its unceasing supply of meat? Herodotus has tantalized his readers with a legend even more astonishing than the disappearance of an army in a desert. But when he describes the Fish-Eaters' tour of the country, he simply says that they saw the Table. They do not question the local story that the meat is the gift of the earth.

We seem to be back with an image of a weird and wonderful land of spontaneous meat-production, sans abattoir, sans celebrity chefs, sans everything. And yet if we look more closely at the description of the Table of the Sun given at the start of the Ethiopian narrative we may find that the Golden Age picture was in fact set against a rather different image. Herodotus explains that a plentiful supply of meat is kept in the meadow, and 'it is the duty of the magistrates to put the meat there at night, and during the day anybody who wishes may come and eat it'. By revealing all this before giving the locals' explanation that the meat is the gift of the earth, Herodotus hints at another possible explanation: the Table of the Sun as an exercise in social control. Is Herodotus' Ethiopia not after all a remake of the Golden Age, but a precursor of the Welfare State? There can be no single solution to the riddles this land poses. But Herodotus' journey to the ends of the earth does at least provide his Greek audience with plenty of food for thought.

Tim Rood is Tutor in Classics at St Hugh's College, Oxford. He has recently published The Sea, the Sea. The shout of the ten thousand in the modern imagination (Duckworth 2004), about a famous cry which is only two words in the original Greek (and those two words are one word repeated twice!). For a hint as to how he managed to write 262 pages about one word see p. 14.